



# CIRCUIT COURT FOR HARFORD COUNTY



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## START-UP PLAN FOLLOWING COVID-19 EMERGENCY CLOSURE

The primary concern in re-opening the court to the public is to ensure the safety and well-being of our employees, counsel, litigants, and those who enter the courthouse. A substantial case backlog exists, given the length of the court closure. As we work to address this backlog, we must manage the workflow within the courthouse in a manner consistent with any existing Executive Orders, with public health recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and State agencies, and with any restrictions or recommendations by the Harford County Executive or local health officials considering health advisories in this area.

The courthouse re-opening will be accomplished in phases, consistent with the directives set forth in Chief Judge Mary Ellen Barbera's Administrative Order on the Progressive Resumption of Full Function of Judiciary Operations Previously Restricted Due to the COVID-19 Emergency, issued on May 22, 2020. Current public health recommendations recognize the continued health risks posed by COVID-19 and the need for ongoing vigilance to reduce the risk of infection and further spread of the disease. Social distancing measures must be enforced within the courthouse to minimize exposure risks. For these reasons, this Start-Up plan will address basic safety and security measures within the courthouse. It will also establish a phased approach to increase gradually the flow of individuals entering the courthouse.

Honorable Angela M. Eaves  
Administrative Judge

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## General Safety and Security Measures

In order to promote safety and security within then building, the following protocols will be in effect:

### Courthouse Entry and Public Areas

The Administrative Order requiring face coverings in public areas within the building, or in private office spaces within six-feet of another, remains in effect;

Health screenings upon entry remain in effect for all non-court staff, to include temperature checks where equipment is available, and persons showing any sign or symptom of illness shall be prohibited from entering;

All persons entering the building (excluding judges, magistrates and court personnel), either through a public or a secure entrance, will be subject to health screening measures in effect;

Persons entering the courthouse can complete the entry health screening questions in advance through the [QR Code posted at the entrance](#) and display results on a smart phone to expedite the entry process;

Any person appearing for a scheduled matter who is refused entry based upon health screening may complete an information form which will then be forwarded to the assigned judicial officer to determine whether the matter will be postponed, or arrangements made for the individual to participate remotely;

The Office Street entrance will be for court staff only;

Housekeeping services will sanitize public areas, to include restrooms, elevator spaces and “high touch” areas daily;

Social distancing markers will be placed in areas where lines may occur, to include the entry area, waiting areas on all levels, near the Clerk’s Office service windows;

Elevators will be restricted to two riders at a time, with the exception of family groups that may ride together;

Stairways will be used to divert people from elevators;

Toys have been removed from the Playroom on Level A.

## Minimizing Contact Within the Courthouse

Telework is encouraged, if approved by a manager and appropriate in light of the job responsibilities of the employee;

Flexible work schedules are encouraged, if approved by a manager and appropriate in light of the job responsibilities of the employee;

The continued use of remote platforms is encouraged, if permissible under the rules and existing administrative orders, to include, but not be limited to, use for motions hearings, uncontested divorces, scheduling conferences, status hearings, and settlement conferences;

Dockets have been staggered start times throughout the day, with matters typically scheduled at 9:00 am, 11:00 am, 1:30 pm and 3:00 pm depending upon case type;

At times when restrictions on public activities remain in effect in the State and/or Harford County, public access to the courthouse will be restricted to counsel, parties and necessary witnesses for cases scheduled on the daily docket, unless otherwise approved by the Administrative Judge;

At times when restrictions on public activities remain in effect in the State or Harford County, services offered within the building, including but not limited to mediation, family service screenings, self-help consultations, parenting classes, and guardianship orientations, will be conducted remotely;

## Clerk's Office Access

Beginning with Phase III, the Clerk's Office is open to the public. Please note that filings that are not required to be made electronically can still be left in a drop box at the Courtland Street entrance to the courthouse, and docketed in the manner outlined in prior Administrative Orders;

## Courtrooms and Secure Areas

Each courtroom will be monitored as to capacity based upon current social distancing recommendations, which limits will be enforced by judicial officers, sheriff's deputies, or security staff;

Social distancing markers will be placed in the gallery areas of courtrooms and waiting rooms to reinforce social distancing requirements;

Each courtroom will be equipped with hand sanitizer and disinfectant for use throughout the day to maintain hygienic conditions;

There will be disinfectant wipes on each trial table for use as desired by attorneys/litigants. Attorneys/litigants should feel free to do use these supplies and may bring/use hand sanitizer.

Overflow from any courtroom will be asked to wait with appropriate social distancing in a hallway;

Face coverings are required within courtrooms;

Access to secure hallways and chambers is restricted to staff unless otherwise authorized by a judicial officer.

## Court Staff Obligations

Court staff experiencing any sign or symptom of illness must stay home from work;

Court staff should keep personal work space clean and sanitized;

Court staff should perform frequent handwashing;

Court staff must employ proper social distancing;

Court staff must wear face coverings in a manner consistent with the Administrative Order;

COURT STAFF ARE EXEMPT DAILY COVID-19 SCREENINGS;

**PLEASE NOTE;** this exemption WILL be rescinded if compliance to the above mandates are ignored by any staff member compromising everyone.

## COVID-19 Positive Testing Reporting Requirements

Any employee who tests positive for COVID-19, or who has been advised by medical personnel that he or she is presumptively positive, shall self-report immediately to his or her Administrative Head, self-quarantine, and not return to the courthouse until cleared by his or her Administrative Head;

Any employee who has been in contact with an individual who tests positive for COVID-19, or who has been advised by medical personnel that he or she is presumptively positive, shall quarantine for 14 days or as otherwise directed by a County Health Officer;

## Inmate Transportation and Care

During Phase III, transportation of inmates between the Detention Center and the courthouse will be minimized and in accordance with current Detention Center protocols.

## Phases Governing Resumption of Court Matters

The Circuit Court will employ a five-phase approach to address the case backlog as the court restores normal court operations. The phases are structured based upon consideration of a variety of factors, to include: (1) the urgency of the matter; (2) the ability to handle the matter utilizing a remote platform; (3) the complexity of the proceeding, particularly the need for witnesses and exhibits; (4) the length of the matter; and (5) the need for jurors. The phases are designed to assist in scheduling matters, both remotely and within the courthouse, to enable social distancing and to protect the health and welfare of judicial employees, attorneys, parties and members of the public.

### PHASE III

*(Gradual Docket Expansion: July 20 through August 30, 2020)*

Phase III signifies a further expansion of onsite courtroom proceedings. Although the volume of cases will increase, they will be spread throughout the day to permit continued social distancing. Contested matters will be limited to one day hearings in this Phase. See COVID-19 Court Re-Opening Plan, Phase III which may be found on the Court's website.

### PHASE IV

**(Resumption of Non-Jury Trials: August 31, 2020 through October 4, 2020)**

Phase IV provides for expansion to matters that are more complex or require additional parties and witnesses. As the court moves into Phase IV there will be an increase in traffic within the courthouse, so renewed assessment of social distancing restrictions and courtroom capacity must be considered. Additional details will be provided on or about August 25, 2020.

## PHASE V

### **(Resumption of Jury Trials and Full Operation: October 5, 2020)**

Phase V reflects the resumption of jury trials in both civil and criminal matters, and protracted trials in family law matters. Consideration must be given to social distancing and juror health. Recommendations developed by the Jury Trial Workgroup of the Conference of Circuit Judges will be considered as additional protocols are developed before resuming jury trials. The following principles will generally apply if all scheduled cases cannot be reached:

Criminal cases beyond the original Hicks deadline will be given priority, and, within that group, older cases will generally be tried first;

Specially assigned civil cases that were postponed will be given priority, whenever possible;

For other civil matters, cases with multiple trial postponements and older cases will be given priority;

For family law matters, priority will be given to specially assigned cases, cases with multiple prior postponements, and older cases.

Additional details will be provided on or about September 30, 2020.